UNITED NATIONS

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS SECTION

Room S-1037D / (212) 963-6842 // Fax: 963-6914

NGO Resource Centre, Room S-101 / (212) 963-7234 New York, N.Y. 10017, USA

DPI/NGO/SB/92/28

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

(Not an official record or press release. This summary is made available to NGO representatives for their information and free dissemination).

On 8 October 1992, Ms. Erica-Irene Daes, Chairperson and Rapporteur of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights; Mr. José Dualok Rojas, President of the Asociacion Cultural Sejékto, La Voz del Indio de Costa Rica; and Mr. Konrad Sioui, Spokesman for the Huron-Wyandot Nation representing the Sioui-Bear Clan, and Executive Director of the International Relations Unit of the Assembly of First Nations briefed NGO representatives on the world's indigenous peoples and activities planned to address their human rights.

Professor Daes praised NGOs for bringing indigenous peoples and their needs to the attention of the world community. Information provided by NGOs prompted the United Nations Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities to launch a study on "Discrimination Against Indigenous Peoples" in 1970. This study, in turn, led to the creation of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) in 1982.

Mrs. Daes said that the WGIP's dual mandate was to review national developments concerning human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples, and to develop international standards concerning those rights.

Professor Daes said that indigenous peoples have finally taken their place in the discussions and on the agenda of the United Nations system. Yet in many parts of the world, the situation of indigenous peoples was still disturbing--in some states, "They are the poorest, most discriminated against, vulnerable, and disadvantaged group of society." Some still faced racism, human rights violations, and deprivation of fundamental freedoms, such as the right to health care, housing, education, training, employment, welfare, and the right to self-determination.

Mrs. Daes added that while there were differences among indigenous peoples, they shared such common problems and concerns as the following:

gradual elimination of their culture, lower-than-average life expectancy, lack of means of livelihood, and deterioration of their environment. In addition, thousands of indigenous people were struggling for their rights, as well as for survival. She said the WGIP was now forming a draft universal declaration of the rights of indigenous peoples, which might be completed by 1993 to coincide with the International Year for the World's Indigenous People.

Other projects undertaken by the WGIP included studies on "Treaties, Agreements and Other Constructive Arrangements Between States and Indigenous Peoples," and "Protection of the Cultural and Intellectual Property of Indigenous Peoples."

Professor Daes said that on 10 December 1992 the General Assembly will launch the 1993 International Year for the World's Indigenous People. The General Assembly has approved activities to foster a new era of mutual respect and partnership--between all peoples, and between governments and indigenous peoples.

During the International Year, two major areas have been identified as needing special attention--information activities and development opportunities. Information, she said, was vital for communicating the concerns of indigenous peoples to a larger audience. She praised the General Assembly's plans to invite indigenous peoples to speak at its plenary session on 10 December 1992.

Mrs. Daes implored NGOs and the media to help disseminate the information they received. This was essential, as the International Year represents the long overdue acknowledgement of indigenous peoples' "humanity, equality, dignity, and respect for their cultural identity."

The General Assembly had recommended the programmes for the year be funded by voluntary contributions. Professor Daes said that the response so far has been disappointing. She called for substantive commitments to provide indigenous peoples with the assistance required for planned projects and NGO representatives to acknowledge that indigenous peoples were human beings.

Mr. Rojas began by asking for a moment of silence, to reflect on the millions of indigenous peoples who have died in the last 500 years.

Sejékto, founded in 1985, represented many different indigenous peoples of Costa Rica and was allied with many indigenous peoples' organizations around the world. Mr. Rojas said that Sejékto participated in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) and helped to focus attention on the needs of Indigenous Peoples living in the rainforest. Sejékto was the regional seat for the Global Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Tropical Rainforests founded in Penang, Malaysia in 1992. Sejékto was also part of the Congress of Indigenous Peoples Organizations of Central America, Mexico, and Panama (COI), as well as an NGO recently accredited to the Department of Public Information.

Mr. Rojas said that indigenous peoples were at an historic moment. For the first time, they were given the opportunity to speak about their rights at the United Nations, and 1993 had been designated the International Year for the World's Indigenous People. Mr. Rojas said that October 1992 was the anniversary of "500 years of ethnocide"--beginning with the conquistadores and continuing with transnational corporations and economically imperialistic governments. They were responsible, he said, for a whole host of disruptive acts that violated human and socio-economic rights.

Mr. Rojas suggested five steps that the United Nations could take to assist indigenous peoples:

1) Create a commission to coordinate activities for the International Year for the World's Indigenous People.
2) Ask the Secretary-General to appropriate funds for the commission.
3) Follow-up on the accords adopted at UNCED.
4) Ask governments to ratify the International Labour Organisation Convention (No. 169) on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples.
5) Promote conditions for the protection of the human rights of indigenous peoples.

Mr. Sioui said that just as the Bribri Nation of José Rojas welcomed Christopher Columbus to Costa Rica, his own Huron Nation welcomed and cared for Jacques Cartier in 1534. Cartier asked the Huron Chief what Canada meant, and was told that it described a "grand village where there is a place for everyone... where there is a place for you to live and coexist with the First Nations." Mr. Sioui said that this was a philosophy of coexistence that was used by all indigenous peoples.

Mr. Sioui said that indigenous peoples did not see the "New Partnership" that was supposed to characterize the International Year for the World's Indigenous People. Actions were being taken unilaterally, without involving indigenous peoples in the decision-making process: "the door is kind of slammed in our face." The status quo, he said, was unacceptable, and he and the indigenous peoples of the world would rely on people of goodwill to help effect change.

Mr. Sioui also said there was no money for the International Year, although it was scheduled to begin in two months. Without funding, the Year would only create false expectations.

He cited an Amnesty International report released the previous day, which addressed human rights abuses being committed against indigenous peoples in South, Central, and North America. This was one reason why the International Year was necessary.

In August, his group had gone to Geneva to discuss projects planned for the International Year, each of which could cost no more than $10,000, but there was still no money available.

Mr. Sioui then spoke briefly about the logo of the International Year, and said that indigenous peoples were not consulted on its design, or on any part of the opening ceremonies. The logo's design resembled a lego block and did not represent indigenous peoples at all, he said. If indigenous peoples had designed it, the logo would have had a circle, representing their holistic thinking. Worse, he said, was the designation of *indigenous people*, without an *s*.

Mr. Sioui said this must end, because they are peoples and they are nations who have fought for treaties with the state of Canada to be recognized. To that end, he called for the United Nations to restructure itself so that indigenous peoples would have an equal place, with their own seats, to allow them to speak as equals. This, he said, would mean peace, harmony, and a better future for humanity as a whole. He also called for an end to the false pretenses that lead to racism and discrimination against indigenous peoples. Mr. Sioui said that indigenous peoples would show the world how they balance environment and development, ecology and economy. Indigenous peoples were invited to attend UNCED but were given only five minutes to speak, or "one minute for each century."

Although indigenous peoples are invited to speak on 10 December before the General Assembly, Mr. Sioui said he is concerned that the United Nations would close its sessions, as indigenous peoples were not Member States. He affirmed his trust in the United Nations and the new Secretary-General to bring an end to this kind of treatment. Mr. Sioui said he hoped that indigenous peoples would not continue to be treated on the international scene in the same manner that they had often been at the domestic level. Indigenous peoples wanted a restructured United Nations, one in which they would have equal footing and representation for their nations.

Mr. Sioui expressed his support for Ms. Rigoberta Menchu, an indigenous leader from Guatemala, whom he said should be awarded the Nobel Prize. This, he said, would have a major impact upon the rest of the decade. He concluded that all people were "members of the Turtle Clan" with a responsibility to the earth, because all people were part of humanity.